[Abdul Sattar](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/abdul-sattar)

March 17, 2021

**Questioning inequalities**

The writer is a freelance journalist.

The question of inequality in human society has always attracted the attention of many thinkers. The recent pandemic has triggered this debate again, with many critics bemoaning the fate of the Global South where vaccines are likely to benefit the mass majority of the people much later than people of the advanced world.

One of the reasons for this phenomenon lies, according to some, in the advancement of the West. It is argued that since industrialized countries are brimming with wealth, they would be the first to take advantage of this cure for the contagion.

Ancient philosophers have justified these inequalities on the basis of natural laws. For them, these inequalities are important to run society. From Sumerians to Egyptians and from the Greeks to the Indians, all agreed that it was an integral part of human society. Even the biggest champions of freedom and equality in the European continent and North America justified these differences on the basis of natural laws and human nature. The ruthless colonization of Asia, the massacre of the indigenous people in the Americas and the plundering of the colonies was also based on this unjust concept of inequality. Even today, there are a number of thinkers and social scientists who come up with arguments in support of this myopic idea of Western superiority.

Authors like Niall Ferguson believe that the West ruled the rest because of democracy, free market, competition, scientific research and concepts like rule of law. His famous book 'The Empire', according to many critics, seems to justify Western imperialism, giving an impression that empire was not all bad as is widely believed in the Global South. But there are many who challenge this notion of Ferguson and other historians like him. They also criticize those who believe that the West managed to rule the rest because of its democratic culture, competition, research and concepts like rule of law.

Some of the critics believe that it was geography that in fact paved the way for European advancement. They contest the idea that European people are more developed because they may have been smarter than people living in other parts of the world. One such author is Jared Diamond, who spent more than twenty years investigating inequalities between parts of the world. Diamond visited Papua Guinea, New Guinea, South America, Central America, Spain and other parts of the world to find out the answer of the question that was asked by a local of New Guinea more than 30 years ago.

A geographer by profession, Diamond has vast knowledge of anthropology, evolutionary biology, history and human societies. He says that people from New Guinea to England and Papua Guinea to America are all the same when it comes to their intellect and skills but it is geography where the roots of inequalities lie. According to him, agriculture surfaced in the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East 13,000 years ago. At that time, people in New Guinea and Papua Guinea were living in jungles hunting animals or acquiring food from trees. The people in the Fertile Crescent domesticated goats, cows, sheep and other animals that helped them increase agriculture production besides enriching their diet. This surplus production enabled the people of the Fertile Crescent to engage in other activities that paved the way to civilization while people living in the jungle spent most of their time working to arrange their food.

From the Middle East, agriculture and domesticated animals spread to Eurasia and some other parts of the world. Again this spread was possible because of geography. Unlike Eurasia, the people of Central and South America were living in rough terrains and in a climate where animals could not be domesticated. Barley, wheat and other crops that were grown in the Fertile Crescent reached Europe. It was Europeans who brought these crops and animals to North America. Out of over a dozen animals that helped the West increase agriculture productivity, none existed in South and Central America.

Even the creation of language was easier in Eurasia than in South and Central America because the rugged mountains and tough terrain made it impossible for people to interact easily, putting an end to the possibilities of communication. While people in Central America had some sort of written language before the Europeans arrived, the same was not the case in the South. So in case of an emergency they could not have sought the help of Central American people.

Some historians however say that claiming the decimation of indigenous people is also linked to geographical factors does not mean that the rapaciousness of the white settlers should be overlooked. Repeated plagues and the spread of other infectious diseases over the centuries had created immunity in European people against infections while no such community existed in South and Central America where according to some estimates 95 percent of the population perished in such infectious diseases.

Some historians assert that surplus production in the Fertile Crescent also enabled the people there to develop steel which reached Europe over the centuries. The development of steel was instrumental in improving the fighting skills of the Europeans. European conflicts before the 15th centuries prompted the ruling elite to master in arms manufacturing. Such weapons and the use of horses, which were alien to the people of Central and South America, played an important role in subjugating those nations. It is quite clear that these natural factors played an important role in the conquest of Central and South America. When Francisco Pizarro arrived in South America, he had only over 100 soldiers but the Spaniard had also brought with him an invisible enemy in the form of germs that annihilated the locals.

The concept that Europeans were somehow unique human beings created the way for colonization and that colonisation led to the ruthless exploitation and plundering of today's developing countries. This inhuman theory emerged as a great threat to mankind because it prompted certain sections of the ruling elites in the Western states to claim racial superiority, which proved to be catastrophic not only for these Western countries but for the world as well. Therefore, it is important to debunk this myth of Western superiority on the basis of their political and economic ideas.

In reality, it was geography that created conditions for European conquests. The ruling elite of the West exploited geographical conditions to ruthlessly exploit the people in the Global South and plunder their wealth. Around 20 tons gold and silver was looted by the Spaniards from a few parts of the Americas. The UK is believed to have snatched away around $45 trillion from India. The black community has been demanding five billion dollars in reparations for the slavery that enriched the modern capitalist world.

Even today, this myopic concept exists in some or another form. The ruling elite in the advanced capitalist world militarily intervene in third world countries – bombing and destroying state after state. Therefore, it is important to challenge this inhuman concept on all platforms. One of the ways to do so could be to incorporate the books of those authors who question this widely held perception of Western superiority. Such books should not be discussed in debating clubs only but included in the syllabus of Western educational institutions. The pernicious tentacles of fascism are once again rearing their monstrous head in the advanced capitalist world and other regions. Questioning inequalities would be one of the ways to deal with them.

Email: egalitarianism444@gmail.com